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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 29 April 2016



(Welcome to Policy Eye, a weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days.)

The week summed up

It's been a familiar tale this week with academies, the build-up to the exam season and continuing questions about the return on investment for graduates all hogging the headlines.

Academies first, dominating much of the political debate once again this week with questions to the Dept on Monday, to the Prime Minister on Wednesday and to the Education Secretary in Committee also on Wednesday.

At the end of the week, little has changed but three issues stand out. First, the element of coercion, forcing schools, admittedly over time, to become academies. This has not gone down well and the Education Secretary did little to in her appearance before the Committee to defuse concerns, it remains an open sore. Second, the role of local authorities, poorly understood but in many people's eyes, valuable and with an umbilical cord into local communities. The latest line on this was provided by the Prime Minister in response to Opposition questions, namely that they won't be able to run trusts although individual council members could apply to become sponsors and schools would be able to purchase local authority services should they wish. And third, what happens now, will there be a Bill, will there be another White Paper? The answer is we'll have to wait a few more weeks when the Queen's Speech is presented to see just what is included.

Second, exams and the familiar build-up of tension that goes with it. Last week it was reported that one school was offering relaxation classes to parents to help reduce stress levels and this week, it was parents once again who were on the receiving end of advice. According to an article in The Daily Telegraph, the best thing parents can do is almost be seen and not heard; it's an interesting role reversal but avoiding the temptation of turning off the screen or the music, helps, it seems create a more positive atmosphere.

Finally, graduate returns, in the news this week with the release from BIS of the latest graduate labour market statistics showing that yes, graduates have higher employment rates than non-graduates but that actually their earnings have hardly increased over recent years. The article by the BBC Education Correspondent Sean Coughlan, linked in the HE section below, is a good read on this subject.

Finally, a few other notable academy-lite developments this week. These have included the recognition from the Schools Minister in a speech to the ASCL curriculum summit that toughening up key stage tests may mean having to live with lower success rates for a while. Also the revelation from the Skills Minister that the government is still considering whether penalties should be imposed on school sixth forms that fail to provide 'balanced' careers advice about different options and routes. And third, an



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important speech from the boss of the CBI exposing some frustrations about the apprenticeship levy and skills training.

Top headlines this week

'Grave risk over academy plans warns County Councils Network' ([Monday](#))

'Academy compulsion is sticking point for Tory MPs.' ([Tuesday](#))

'Leave us alone: teens plea to parents suffering from exam stress.' ([Wednesday](#))

'English graduates saddled with debt research shows.' ([Thursday](#))

'Primary testing regime chaotic, say headteachers' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

[In front of the committee.](#) The Education Secretary appears before the Education Committee and maintains a straight bat in response to inevitable questions about academies and DfE accounts

[Curriculum reform.](#) Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister, offers a strong defence of the current reforms in an address to the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) curriculum summit but does confirm a review of modern foreign language teaching,

[Exams and qualifications.](#) Ofqual's summary of how things went last year and how it performed against its five strategic objectives has now been published

[Digital Divide.](#) New research from the CBI and IBM suggests a digital divide among UK businesses continues to persist with skills shortages being one of the issues

[National Innovation Plan.](#) The government is looking for 'innovative' ideas in 7 areas including regulation, infrastructure and intellectual property

[PISA update.](#) In the latest interview as part of the build-up to this year's release of the 2015 PISA test results for 15 year olds, Director for Education and Skills for the OECD, Andreas Schleicher highlights how the test has changed to accommodate problem solving skills

[Early years support and provision.](#) Labour calls for comments and ideas as it seeks to review its policy in this area ahead of its Annual Conference

HE

[University ranking.](#) The latest (2017) version of the Complete University Guide which ranks universities and courses on a range of quality measures has been published and with Oxbridge one and two has changed little. The biggest mover up is Loughborough (up from 11th to 7th) and down is Bristol (from 15th to 24th)



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[Graduate labour market stats](#). BIS's latest data for 2015 reinforces current patterns with graduates continuing to enjoy higher employment rates generally but with a lot still depending on the level, subject and background of the graduate in question

[Commentary on those labour market stats](#). The BBC's Sean Coughlan casts a forensic eye over those latest labour market figures and suggests that for many graduates, earnings have hardly risen at all

[Graduate debt](#). The Sutton Trust's latest report compares what graduates end up paying in 8 other English-speaking nations and concludes that for the typical student, the average debt is higher for a student in England than elsewhere (£44,000 after 3 years in England compared to £29,000 after 4 years in a private university in the US, although interest rates vary)

[New residency rules for student support](#). The government has responded to earlier consultation by proposing new residency criteria in two categories: those aged 18 and under, those aged 18 and above

FE/Skills

[Apprenticeship Levy](#). CBI Director-General Carolyn Fairbairn makes a wide – ranging speech on the importance of skills and of getting the apprenticeship levy right calling among other things for more flexibility on how employers should spend the levy and a more strategic role for the Institute for Apprenticeships

[Regulated qualifications](#). Ofqual publishes a further reminder, largely for Awarding Organisations, about the requirements on size and learning time of qualifications in the new Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF)

Schools

[Academies and the Education Act](#). The think tank Centre Forum produces an interesting briefing paper highlighting the escalating workload that might face the DfE and Regional Commissioners as new rules on intervention and performance brought in by the Act are implemented which could lead to a large increase in academy numbers

[Academy v council school performance](#). The Local Government Association publishes its own commissioned research suggesting that council run schools perform better in Ofsted inspections than academies although much depends on what is being compared

[Course guidance](#). The Skills Minister confirms at this week's sub-committee hearing on careers advice and apprenticeships that the government is still considering imposing penalties on school sixth forms that fail to give their students 'appropriate' advice about courses including apprenticeships

[Disadvantaged schools missing out](#). The Social Market Foundation in conjunction with education datalab have highlighted how schools in the most disadvantaged areas tend to up with the least experienced and least qualified teachers, thereby perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage

[Segregation in some independent faith schools](#). The issue has been raised again by Sir Michael Wilshaw in a letter to the Education Secretary citing evidence from a school in Luton

[Phonics](#). New research from the LSE's Centre for Economic Performance finds that the use of synthetic phonics can help teach disadvantaged children how to read in the early stages but has little effect by the time they reach age 11



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SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.) The DfE publishes commissioned research into how well the Education, Health and Care (EHC) system is working for SEND users and finds that while some are concerned it's a tick-box ticking exercise, most people are broadly satisfied

Vulnerable Children. The Cambridge Primary Review with support from Pearson considers what progress has been made and what more needs to be done to support vulnerable children in primary and calls for a mix of services

Schools and technology. The education technology company RM Education lists 5 top tips for using technology effectively in a recent blog

Tweet(s) of the week

"I'm not planning any future changes to the national curriculum says nicky morgan #edselctte" @tes

"Businesses passionate about apprenticeships but frustrated over the levy. Radical rethink needed to deliver quality not quantity" @cbicarolyn

"Nick Boles agrees parents are a harder crack to nut on apprenticeships-which is why they're running a pretty big gov't campaign" @FEWeek

"Press release says pupils with desk at home more likely to get good GCSE grades. Based on survey organised by office furniture company" @warwickmansell

Word or phrase(s) of the week

'Blockchain technology.' Not something you pull but a system developed from Bitcoin that allows digital records to be verified and shared across a chain rather than in separate places, with the potential to transform government and other services according to Cabinet Minister Matt Hancock in a speech this week

Quote(s) of the week

"Parents, schools, leaders and others deserve clarity on this key issue" - Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell calls on the Education Secretary to come clean about whether all schools, good or otherwise, will be forced to become an academy

"There are so many questions"- former Education Secretary Estelle Morris raises a few of them in a comment piece on academies in [The Guardian](#)

"I'm not going to leave the job half done" – The Education Secretary defends her academy plans to MPs

"In terms of focusing attention, textbooks do not wait to receive that next email or tweet" – Former government adviser and research director Tim Oates makes the case for textbooks at a seminar on the matter this week

"Happiness is not an app you can download"- Pope Francis addresses teenagers

"I was seeking a fool when I found you" – The Independent Arts section heralds the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death by listing 10 Shakespearean insults that still work well (This one is from As You Like It)



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Number(s) of the week

14th. Where UK companies rank globally in terms of adopting digital technology, according to CBI/IBM research

38 minutes. How long the average teenager concentrates on revision before their attention wanders, according to evidence quoted in the Daily Telegraph this week

90%. The number of adults in the UK who now regularly use the internet according to Ofcom's recent survey of how adults use digital media. This figure has hardly changed over the last 2 years although the number using a smartphone to go online has increased (by 4%)

15. The number of underperforming schools a month that will need to be converted into academies according to the think tank Centre Forum following the introduction of new rules on intervention and performance

10%. The 'expertise gap' (the gap in terms of expertise and experience) that exists at KS4 maths for many secondary schools serving disadvantaged areas according to SMF/education datalab research

What to look out for next week

MPs Questions to the BIS Dept (Tuesday)

Scottish Parliament, Welsh, Northern Ireland and London Assembly elections, English local council elections and London Mayoral election (all on Thursday)